

## Deconstruction of the myth of language as a transparent tool of representation in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*

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### ABSTRACT

*Postmodernist fiction, with an endless questioning of the existing canons of the past and the present, rejects all the conventional claims vis-à-vis epistemology and ontology. Postmodernists such as Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, and Lyotard have rejected the conventional ideology in terms of how one perceives and gains knowledge. The question of representation becomes a pressing question in the era of postmodernism. In *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, Calvino narrates this nature of language as a tool that stalls the possibility transparent narration. Language assumes the quality of Derrida's 'aporia' and instead of presenting stable meanings, highlights either multiple meanings or no meaning at all. The fiction typifies the epistemological problems and suggests the inability of capturing knowledge. It is construed that the notion of representation becomes essential issues in postmodern fiction. In this process, postmodern stance on language, in which the final signified is reduced to the status of endless deferral, occupy the center stage.*

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In the fictions, the referential problem in language takes place through multiple ways. The self-referentiality of the novel, which involves the reader in the process of the novel, leads to an endless beginning that perpetually prolongs the span of this collective play. The narrator opens the lines, "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade" (3). It is not just a metafictional quality, which can be found in any modern book, but the sincere involvement of the reader in this metafictional play by literally making him one of the characters in it makes the novel a suitable example of the postmodern referential problem.

On the one hand, the play of the novel involves the reader in this tricky and playful process and on the other hand, it represents the problems of referentiality and representation. The writer playfully involves the reader in the following statements: "The pages of the book are clouded like the windows of an old train, the cloud of smoke rests on the sentences" (10). This subtle and indirect involvement intensifies the play in the novel by diffusing the transparency of language in terms of its capturing the external world and representing the same. Language, instead of illuminating things, dissolves the clear-cut predictions or structural deductions. Calvino in his novel openly opines that, "The lights of the station and the sentences you are reading seem to have a job of dissolving more than of indicating the things that surface from a veil of darkness and fog" (11). It is construed that the language of the novel, instead of illuminating or revealing clear-cut meanings, dissolves the meaning into multiple channels or defers the so-called final signified.

In the infinite process of Derridian deferral, in which the signified is simply deferred or in other words, the chain of subsequent signifieds appears, the meaning is either deferred, or it is turned into a void of emptiness. The space is called 'nothingness': the devoid of meaning in language. Calvino,

instead of providing descriptive narration of a character, portrays a character or an event with this 'nothingness'. He posits, "Or, rather: that man is called 'I' and you know nothing else about him, just as this station is called only 'station' and beyond it there exists nothing except the unanswered signal of a telephone ringing in a dark room of a distant city" (11).

Language does not pose fixed meanings, but the piles of suppositions. Each word or a sentence carries suppositions that may be mutually accepted by the receiver and the sender. The same referential problem becomes an inherent problem in postmodern novels. Calvino narrates this problem of suppositions in communication or language delivery in his novels. He states, "Perhaps this is why the author piles suppositions on suppositions in long paragraphs without dialogue, a thick, opaque layer of lead where I may pass unnoticed, disappear" (14).

It must be noticed that postmodern language differs from the modernist/structuralist views, which confirms the stability of the signified. On the other hand, the postmodern language deconstructs this very instability of the final signified. This postmodern development of language has been advocated by Derrida, who has questioned the stability of the signified offered by Saussure. According to Derrida, sign does not lead to a specific signification, but rather to endless signifieds or in other words, many more signs. This uncertainty and plurality of signs and the phenomenon of deferral are presented by Ann Smock. He posits:

The trace of which Derrida writes is not a vestige of an origin that disappeared. What 'trace' means is that there never was an origin to disappear – that there never is any origin at all until belatedly, so to speak, via a deferral. Something non-original – a trace – constitutes it. Thus it must be said that the trace is the origin of the origin. Even though everything hinges on the trace's not being anything original at all, it is necessary to speak of an arche-trace because otherwise the concept of the

trace would remain stuck in a classical schema where it means a lingering sign of something else which isn't a trace, but a presence (73).

Calvino in his novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* explores this representational problems in terms of both language and form. The incapability of language to represent the true picture of the world or final signifieds is noted in the novel. Sometimes language becomes irrelevant, insufficient, or incapable to present things as they are. Rorty has rightly pointed out the incapability of language to represent true signifieds. In his pragmatic philosophy, he has mentioned the problematic relationship between reality and language. He rejects final meaning of language saying that one bit of language corrects another bit of language, and no 'final vocabulary' is sufficient to convey true reality. He points out that language is usually 'coated' with individual perceptions, and it is not possible to get out of language to judge reality.

Calvino, similarly, explores this linguistic dilemma on several occasions. For instance, the conversation between Professor Uzzi-Tuzii and the Reader in the novel suggest this typicality. Their conversation marks many ellipses and dashes at the end of statements leaving them incomplete. The reader asks the Professor, "Excuse me, it was about some information... We telephoned you... Miss Ludmilla... Is Miss Ludmilla here?" Similarly, the Professor replies, "Are you interested in Cimmerian Literature or—" (50). This inability of language is seen everywhere in the novel. There are many incidents during which the narrator himself narrates this dilemma of referential problem: "There are days when everything seems to be charged with meaning: messages it would be difficult for me to communicate to others, define, translate into words, but which for this very reason appear to me decisive" (55).

The representation of external reality is usually a main concern of a novelist. In the present novel, the narrator uses the descriptive narrative on certain occasion, and on other occasions, he refrains from describing things. This deliberate attempt by the writer questions the descriptive technique as well as the blind trust on language. He contrasts two occasions: one suffused with detailed description and the other left alone for the reader to imagine. This is a subtle hint of the referential problem of language to represent reality as it is. The narrator mentions in one of the stories of the novel, "I convey to him the effort I am making to read between the lines of things the evasive meaning of what is in store for me" (62).

Language has been ceased to be viewed as a tool to represent reality or one meaning. The final signified is continuously deferred as suggested by Derrida in his concept of differance. Postmodern novels deconstruct the myth of single meaning or final signified. The narrator in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* puts it, "Torn between the necessity to interject glosses on multiple meanings of the text and the awareness that all interpretation is a use of violence and caprice against a text, the professor, when faced by the most complicated passages, could find no better way of aiding comprehension than to read them in the original" (68-9). It can be identified that the writer interweaves both the referential problems of language and formalistic problems, as they are associated with the task of representation.

The search for the complete and meaningful story leads to an altogether different story with the same problem of incompleteness, and the chain of incompleteness continues

throughout the novel. The reader gets out of one incomplete story, and in his attempt to find the remaining complete part, he enters into a different incomplete story. The trauma of incompleteness, thus, continues endlessly to lead from one story to another, creating the chain of limitless incompleteness. The dilemma of the stories within story resists completeness and linearity, and postmodern writers, in their attempt to reject conventional linearity, employs either circular chain of stories within stories, or endless incomplete stories. Carlos Ruiz Zafon, in his *The Shadow of the Wind*, employs similar representational game by narrating stories within stories in a circular way. Just like Calvino, the writer, too, includes the reader in the fictional process of narration. The novel introduces a dilemma of the reader, in which the reader pursues, just like the reader in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, for the novelistic quest to find the final meaning. The writer intrigues the reader in the narrative play that resists easy interpretation and comprehension of the stories. What the reader gets is stories leading to other stories, signs leading to the multitudes of other signs. The quest of Daniel, a reader, explorer, corresponds with the quest of the reader in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. Both the search for the lost meanings and the threads of the meanings suggest complexities in their journey.

Employing Derridian deferral, he simply provides an infinite chain of signifiers rather than providing a final signified. Despite providing the promise in the beginning of any plot, he thwarts the meanings by his narratorial as well as linguistic play leading the reader to an infinite stasis where floating signifiers dance indefinitely. Calvino deconstructs the center of authorship, final meaning in terms of completeness, and unity of form. This is how the postmodern spirit deconstructs the world of authorship and, "challenges the authorial authoritarianism and undermines such a proposition by foregrounding the fictionality of the fiction making process through self-referentiality which exposes free play and slippage" (Salat, "Sub-versions and Contra-dictions" 29).

The conventional binary of the world of the author and the world of reader dissolve in the work by paving the way to crisscross the boundaries. The narratorial play of absence and presence in terms of meaning generation involves the reader in it. This game of absence and presence, a linguistic one as proposed by Derrida in the process of endless references that a work can suggest, expresses the idea of absence in the very process. It is this idea of absence, which is responsible for the channelizing of the linguistic process, perpetuates the channel of endless signifiers. The similar dilemma is narrated by the writer, "Ideally, the book would begin by giving the sense of a space occupied by my presence, because all around me there are only inert objects, including the telephone, a space that apparently cannot contain anything but me, isolated in my interior time, and there is the interruption of the continuity of time, the space is no longer what it was before because it is occupied by the ring, and my presence is no longer what it was before because it is conditioned by the will of this object that is calling" (133).

The uncertainty of language is overtly expressed by the author and is one of the reasons behind refraining from giving complete descriptions that is found in any common novel. The narrator confesses, "I say 'should' because I doubt that written words can give even a partial idea of it" (132), while narrating one incident in the chapter *In a Line of Network that Enlace*. The novel posts several contradictions in relation to representation. These contradictions suggest the linguistic

deadlocks that hinder the reader in his act of interpretation. In the story *In a Line of Network* that Enlace the narrator posits, "I do not know this Marjorie, I do not know any Marjorie...." (137). The next line uttered by the narrator negates the previous lines: "To tell the truth, here at the university there is a student named Marjorie, Marjorie Stubbs" (138). In addition to this, it is worth mentioning that human consciousness is predestined to interpret things available at the sight. It is this urge or passion that the postmodernist fiction seeks to deconstruct and hence, "the general idea of the world resisting the compulsive attempts of the human consciousness to interpret it, of the human predicament being in some sense 'absurd', does underlie a good deal of postmodernist writing" (Lodge, "Postmodernist Fiction" 255).

It used to be considered in the days of structuralism that language has a fixed system of sign, signifier and signified. The discourse has to produce fixed meanings in a fixed narrative form. But the post-structuralist wing rejecting the entire system of meaning generation paves alternative ways for the writers to follow. As a result, the narrative changes into a shaken ground with multiplicity of meanings or devoid of meanings. FransonManjali has rightly opined on the present scenario dominated by post-structuralism:

The post-structuralist critique of structuralism was directed against two main points of view. Firstly, 'structure' understood in terms of a totalization and closure of content was not acceptable. Meaning is not trapped within a closed totality of discourse and language. The acts of meaning attributable to any specific and situated individuals always exceed this presumed closure. There is no 'code' that permanently fixes the meaning of utterances. Meanings are historically accretive as well as unstable (45).

One of the tendencies of postmodern writers is to associate body with the text or in other words, language with the body; and in its course, both sexuality and textuality intermingle with one another and with the metonymic play their relationship becomes further complicated. In a postmodern novel, "the body has to be the desire of language itself for a body, the need to mere words to be embodied in a text. But the 'body' of a text is not to be found in its physical production alone of paper and glue and ink, but in its mental production of desire for an absent presence" (Hariharan 60). In Calvino's novel, one can find the text being replaced by the body and turning into an object of reading. It is as though the body is read and not the text when the narrator puts it, "Ludmilla, now you are being read. Your body is being subjected to a systematic reading, through channels of tactile information, visual, olfactory, and not without some intervention of the taste buds" (155).

This uncertainty in terms of the language owing to its free play marks a significant difference between the realist works and the postmodern works. Calvino further mentions the postmodern trauma of language: "It is only through the confining act of writing that the immensity of the unwritten of the nonwritten becomes legible, that is, through the uncertainties of spelling, the occasional lapses, oversights, unchecked leaps of the word and the pen. Otherwise what is outside of us should not insist on communicating through the word: spoken or written: let it send its message by other paths" (183). The free play of the signifiers or the floating signifiers in the language usage that deny the final signified can be seen on several occasions. The phenomenon is identified when

Ludmilla while referring to the writer's creativity mentions, "I've always thought that you write the way some animals dig holes or build anthills or make beehives" (190). The statement, though referred to the writer's creativity, can be attributed with multiple meanings as the words connote both positive and negative signals.

This post-structuralist view of language denies fixed meanings of all kinds leading to an environment of floating signifiers. Hence, there are only multitudes of traces left as an outcome of writing. It would be pertinent to quote Derrida's saying, "there is nothing outside the text" when Ludmilla points out the same phenomenon: "The truth of literature consists only in the physicality of the act of writing" (190). Hence, the writer has to equally posit that, "there is no certitude outside falsification" (193) denying the totality of truth emanating from the words or the written texts.

The closure is an essential point that used to be a matter of serious consideration is not accepted by the postmodernists. There are only beginnings or in other words, there is only a surface with a permanent devoid of depth. The search of the hidden meaning or deeper meaning does not find a place in postmodern fiction. The narration suggesting only surface resurfaces every now and then from both the plots of the multiple stories and the self-conscious narrative voice. Silas Flannery in his personal diary mentions, "The romantic fascination produced in the pure state by the first sentences of the first chapter of many novels is soon lost in the continuation of the story: it is the promise of a time of reading that extends before us and can comprise all possible developments" (177).

The realist writers or to some an extent modernist writers used to claim that reality or the truth can be captured in the written text. For example, the realist writers used to conquer reality and truth by the way of realist narrative techniques, whereas the modernists refrained from the so-called realist techniques, but they continue to do so by the subjectivized narrative techniques, i.e. a stream of consciousness technique. The modernists continuously pursued the search for the final signified. On the other hand, the postmodernist writers renounce the entire project of representation or the idea of realism or the final signified. On the one hand, postmodern thinkers like Derrida and Rorty have denounced and renounced the entire campaign of realism and the final signified, and on the other hand, the trapping or capturing of reality or truth or final signified in the written text is termed as untenable. The narrator rightly points out that, "there is always something essential that remains outside the written sentence; indeed, the things that the novel does not say are necessarily more numerous than those it does say, and only a special halo around what is written can give the illusion that you are reading also what is unwritten" (203).

The resistance to the truth or external reality leads the writer to construct the kind of language that ceases to be meaningful. The narrator says: "The multicolored wires now grind out the dust of dissolved words: the thethe, of ofof, from fromfromfrom, that that that that, in columns according to their respective frequency. The book has been crumbled, dissolved, can no longer be recomposed, like a sand dune blown away by the wind" (220). The conventional role of a protagonist that is to lead the novel and play a pivotal role in the progress of a novel is deconstructed. In fact, the central character or the protagonist, the Reader, indulges in various crusades filled with irony and finally, invokes irony in the entire making of the protagonist.

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